PART II.
EIGHT PAGES.

New-York Tribune

MISCELLANY
AND ART.

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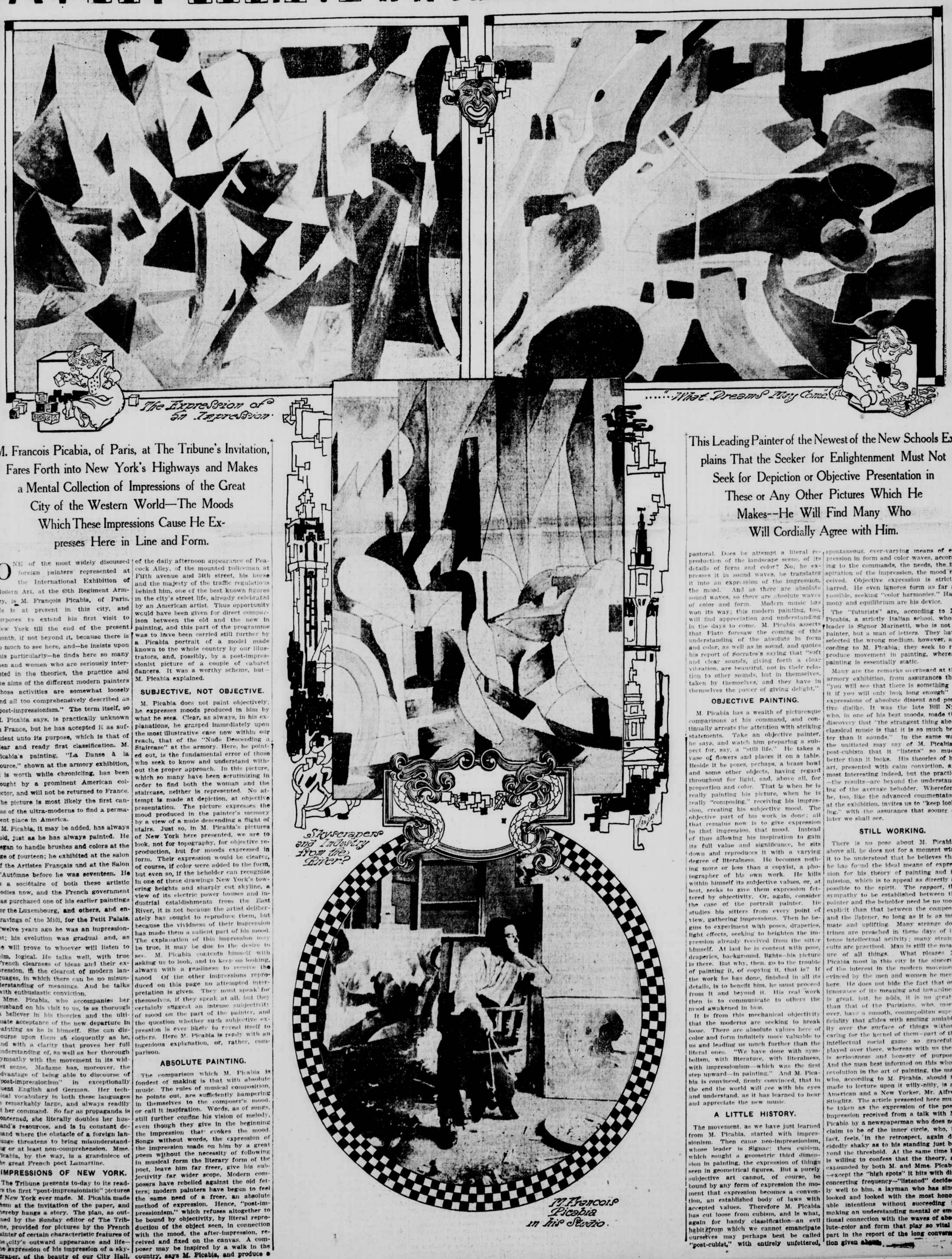
A POST-CUBIST'S IMPRESSIONS OF NEW YORK



M. Francois Picabia, of Paris, at The Tribune's Invitation, Fares Forth into New York's Highways and Makes a Mental Collection of Impressions of the Great City of the Western World—The Moods Which These Impressions Cause He Expresses Here in Line and Form.

This Leading Painter of the Newest of the New Schools Explains That the Seeker for Enlightenment Must Not Seek for Depiction or Objective Presentation in These or Any Other Pictures Which He Makes--He Will Find Many Who Will Cordially Agree with Him.

ONE of the most widely discussed foreign painters represented at the International Exhibition of Modern Art, at the 69th Regiment Armory, is M. François Picabia, of Paris. He is at present in this city, and purposes to extend his first visit to New York till the end of the present month, if not beyond it, because there is so much to see here, and—he insists upon this particularly—he finds here so many men and women who are seriously interested in the theories, the practice and the aims of the different modern painters whose activities are somewhat loosely and all too comprehensively described as "post-impressionism." The term itself, so M. Picabia says, is practically unknown in France, but he has accepted it as sufficient unto its purpose, which is that of clear and ready first classification. M. Picabia's painting, "La Danse à la Source," shown at the armory exhibition, it is worth while chronicling, has been bought by a prominent American collector, and will not be returned to France. The picture is most likely the first canvas of the ultra-moderns to find a permanent place in America.

M. Picabia, it may be added, has always sold, just as he has always painted. He began to handle brushes and colors at the age of fourteen; he exhibited at the salon of the Artistes Français and at the Salon d'Automne before he was seventeen. He is a sociétaire of both these artistic bodies now, and the French government has purchased one of his earlier paintings for the Luxembourg, and others, and engravings of the Midi, for the Petit Palais. Twelve years ago he was an impressionist; his evolution was gradual and, as he will prove to whoever will listen to him, logical. He talks well, with true French clearness of ideas and their expression, in the clearest of modern languages, in which there can be no misunderstanding of meanings. And he talks with enthusiastic conviction.

Mme. Picabia, who accompanies her husband on his visit to us, is as thorough a believer in his theories and the ultimate acceptance of the new departure in painting as he is himself. She can discourse upon them as eloquently as he, and with a clarity that proves her full understanding of, as well as her thorough sympathy with the movement in its widest sense. Madame has, moreover, the advantage of being able to discourse of "post-impressionism" in exceptionally fluent English and German. Her technical vocabulary in both these languages is remarkably large, and always readily at her command. So far as propaganda is concerned, she literally doubles her husband's resources, and is in constant demand where the obstacle of a foreign language threatens to bring misunderstanding or at least non-comprehension. Mme. Picabia, by the way, is a grandniece of the great French poet Lamartine.

IMPRESSIONS OF NEW YORK.

The Tribune presents to-day to its readers the first "post-impressionistic" pictures of New York ever made. M. Picabia made them at the invitation of the paper, and thereby hangs a story. The plan, as outlined by the Sunday editor of The Tribune, provided for pictures by the French painter of certain characteristic features of the city's outward appearance and life—the expression of his impression of a skyscraper, of the beauty of our City Hall, of the daily afternoon appearance of Peacock Alley, of the mounted policeman at Fifth avenue and 34th street, his horse and the majesty of the traffic regulations behind him, one of the best known figures in the city's street life, already celebrated by an American artist. Thus opportunity would have been given for direct comparison between the old and the new in painting, and this part of the programme was to have been carried still further by a Picabia portrait of a model made known to the whole country by our illustrators, and, possibly, by a post-impressionist picture of a couple of cabaret dancers. It was a worthy scheme, but—M. Picabia explained.

SUBJECTIVE, NOT OBJECTIVE.

M. Picabia does not paint objectively; he expresses moods produced in him by what he sees. Clear, as always, in his explanations, he grasped immediately upon the most illustrative case now within our reach, that of the "Nude Descending a Staircase" at the armory. Here, he pointed out, is the fundamental error of those who seek to know and understand without the proper approach. In this picture, which so many have been scrutinizing in order to find both the woman and the staircase, neither is represented. No attempt is made at depiction, at objective presentation. The picture expresses the mood produced in the painter's memory by a view of a nude descending a flight of stairs. Just so, in M. Picabia's pictures of New York here presented, we are to look, not for topography, for objective reproduction, but for moods expressed in form. Their expression would be clearer, of course, if color were added to the form, but even so, if the beholder can recognize in one of these drawings New York's towering heights and sharply cut skyline, a view of its electric power houses and industrial establishments from the East River, it is not because the artist deliberately has sought to reproduce them, but because the vividness of their impression has made them a salient part of his mood. The explanation of this impression may be true, it may be due to the desire to see. M. Picabia contents himself with asking us to look, and to keep on looking, always with a readiness to receive the mood. Of the other impressions reproduced on this page no attempted interpretation is given. They must speak for themselves, if they speak at all, but they certainly suggest an intense subjectivity of mood on the part of the painter, and the question whether such subjective expression is ever likely to reveal itself to others. Here M. Picabia is ready with an ingenious explanation, or, rather, comparison.

ABSOLUTE PAINTING.

The comparison which M. Picabia is fondest of making is that with absolute music. The rules of musical composition, he points out, are sufficiently hampering in themselves to the composer's mood, or call it inspiration. Words, as of songs, still further confine his vision of melody, even though they give in the beginning the impression that evokes the mood. Songs without words, the expression of the impression made on him by a great poem without the necessity of following in musical form the literary form of the poet, leave him far freer, give his subjectivity far wider scope. Modern composers have rebelled against the old fetters; modern painters have begun to feel the same need of a freer, an absolute method of expression. Hence, "post-impressionism," which refuses altogether to be bound by objectivity, by literal reproduction of the object seen, in connection with the mood, the after-impression, received and fixed on the canvas. A composer may be inspired by a walk in the country, says M. Picabia, and produce a pastoral. Does he attempt a literal reproduction of the landscape scene, of its details of form and color? No; he expresses it in sound waves, he translates it into an expression of the impression, the mood. And as there are absolute sound waves, so there are absolute waves of color and form. Modern music has won its way; this modern painting, too, will find appreciation and understanding in the days to come. M. Picabia asserts that Plato foresaw the coming of this understanding of the absolute in form and color, as well as in sound, and quotes his report of Socrates's saying that "soft and clear sounds, giving forth a clear vibration, are beautiful, not in their relation to other sounds, but in themselves, taken by themselves, and they have in themselves the power of giving delight."

OBJECTIVE PAINTING.

M. Picabia has a wealth of picturesque comparisons at his command, and continually arrests the attention with striking statements. Take an objective painter, he says, and watch him preparing a subject for, say, a "still life." He takes a vase of flowers and places it on a table. Beside it he poses, perhaps, a brass bowl and some other objects, having regard throughout for light, and, above all, for proportion and color. That is when he is really painting his picture, when he is really "composing," receiving his impression, creating his subjective mood. The objective part of his work is done; all that remains now is to give expression to that impression, that mood. Instead of thus allowing his inspiration to gain its full value and significance, he sits down and reproduces it with a varying degree of literalness. He becomes nothing more or less than a copyist, a photographer of his own work. He kills within himself its subjective values, or, at best, seeks to give them expression fettered by objectivity. Or, again, consider the case of the portrait painter. He studies his sitters from every point of view, gathering impressions. Then he begins to experiment with poses, draperies, light effects, seeking to heighten the impression already received from the sitter himself. At last he is content with pose, draperies, background, lights—his picture is there. But why, then, go to the trouble of painting it, or copying it, that is? If the work he has done, finished in all its details, is to benefit him, he must proceed from it and beyond it. His real work then is to communicate to others the mood awakened in him.

It is from this mechanical objectivity that the moderns are seeking to break loose. There are absolute values here of color and form infinitely more valuable to us and leading us much further than the literal ones. "We have done with symbolism, with literature, with literalness, with impressionism—which was the first step upward—in painting." And M. Picabia is convinced, firmly convinced, that in the end the world will see with his eyes and understand, as it has learned to hear and appreciate the new music.

A LITTLE HISTORY.

The movement, as we have just learned from M. Picabia, started with impressionism. Then came neo-impressionism, whose leader is Signac; then cubism, which sought a geometric third dimension in painting, the expression of things seen in geometrical figures. But a purely subjective art cannot, of course, be bound by any form of expression the moment that expression becomes a convention, an established body of laws with accepted values. Therefore M. Picabia has cut loose from cubism, and is what, again for handy classification—an evil habit from which we cannot emancipate ourselves may perhaps best be called "post-cubist," with entirely unfettered, spontaneous, ever-varying means of expression in form and color waves, according to the commands, the needs, the inspiration of the impression, the mood received. Objective expression is strictly barred. He even ignores form as far as possible, seeking "color harmonies." Harmony and equilibrium are his device.

The "futurists" are, according to M. Picabia, a strictly Italian school, whose leader is Signor Marinetti, who is not a painter, but a man of letters. They have selected the wrong medium, however, according to M. Picabia; they seek to reproduce movement in painting, whereas painting is essentially static.

Many are the remarks overheard at the armory exhibition, from assurances that "you will see that there is something in it if you will only look long enough" to expressions of absolute dissent and positive dislike. It was the late Bill Nye who, in one of his best moods, made the discovery that "the strangest thing about classical music is that it is so much better than it sounds." In the same way the unitiated may say of M. Picabia's post-cubism that it "listens" so much better than it looks. His theories of his art, presented with calm conviction, are most interesting indeed, but the practice—the results—are beyond the understanding of the average beholder. Wherefore, he, too, like the advanced commentators at the exhibition, invites us to "keep looking," with the assurance that sooner or later we shall see.

STILL WORKING.

There is no pose about M. Picabia; above all, he does not for a moment wish it to be understood that he believes that he has found the ideal means of expression for his theory of painting and its mission, which is to appeal as directly as possible to the spirit. The *rapport*, the sympathy to be established between the painter and the beholder need be no more explicit than that between the composer and the listener, so long as it is as intimate and uplifting. Many strange doctrines are preached in these days of intense intellectual activity; many strange cults are practised. Man is still the measure of all things. What pleases M. Picabia most in this city is the sincerity of the interest in the modern movement evinced by the men and women he meets here. He does not hide the fact that our ignorance of its meaning and inwardness is great, but, he adds, it is no greater than that of the Parisians, who, moreover, have a smooth, cosmopolitan superficiality that glides with smiling amiability over the surface of things without caring for the kernel of them—part of the intellectual social game so gracefully played over there, whereas with us there is seriousness and honesty of purpose. And the man best informed on this whole revolution in the art of painting, the man who, according to M. Picabia, should be made to lecture upon it willy-nilly, is an American and a New Yorker, Mr. Alfred Stieglitz. The article presented here must be taken as the expression of the post-impression received from a talk with M. Picabia by a newspaperman who does not claim to be of the inner circle, who, in fact, feels, in the retrospect, again decidedly shaky as to his standing just beyond the threshold. At the same time he is willing to confess that the theory, as expounded by both M. and Mme. Picabia—except the "high spots" it hits with disconcerting frequency—"listened" decidedly well to him, a layman who has since looked and looked with the most honorable intentions without succeeding in making an understanding mental or emotional connection with the waves of absolute-color and form that play so vital a part in the report of the long conversation given above.